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ABSTRACT

A young Latina mother's appreciation of a children's book inspired the development of a parent discussion program. Hispanic parents meet regularly to examine children's literature, a non-threatening, non-academic topic. Parents discuss books written in Spanish and stories and poems written by their children. Through the project, parents learn to encourage their children to read and write, and the parents begin to write themselves. Discussions can be dramatic and surprising in content. Children have been able to view tape recordings of some sessions in community viewings, increasing their family pride. Parents have gradually replaced teachers as facilitators in the small-group discussions and have begun to participate more in educational decision-making. Both parents and children have been empowered by the program. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Los Libros Mágicos

*A small miracle among parents
in the Pajaro Valley.*

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A YOUNG Latina mother, some-
what intimidated in front of a
group of nearly a hundred
people, is about to read a story
written by her daughter Araceli. She hesi-
tates, unsure whether the story is appropri-
ate, and apologizes because it contains
words she considers unseemly.

At last, she holds up the title page of Ar-
aceli's book, made by photocopying draw-
ings and sentences onto colored paper. The
page shows a man in field workers' cloth-
ing, boots and a hat. He holds a long whip in
his hand. A small girl stands next to him,
barely reaching to his knee.

The mother begins to read in Spanish: "I
am going to tell you a story about a father
who returned home from work very angry."
Here, the mother interrupts to explain: "All
of this is true. My husband is much older
than me, and he comes home very tired. And
if the children are talking loudly or making
noise, he gets upset and," she adds with
obvious pain, "he sometimes scolds and
even punishes them."

She resumes reading the story. When the
father returned home upset, his daughter
learned he was tired. At that point, the story
reads, "The old man received a big surprise.
His little daughter told him, 'Look, Father, I
have a cure for your tiredness...I will tell you
a very pretty story that Mother read me from
a book'...and the story was so amusing that
the father forgot how tired he was and he
laughed and hugged his little daughter and
gave her a kiss."

Araceli, the five-year-old author of this
story, has discovered a small miracle: not
only can books be entertaining, but they can
influence reality—Araceli can put her eld-
erly father in a good mood when he comes
home exhausted and angry. So powerful is
this discovery that Araceli turns it into a
story and has her sister write it down for her.

The experience prompted Araceli's
mother, who read her daughter the original
story that Celi in turn told her father, to

overcome her nervousness and share her
daughter's book before the large crowd.
These parents, along with Araceli's mother,
participate in an innovative children's lit-
erature discussion project designed for par-
ents by the Bilingual Program of the Pajaro
Valley School District in Watsonville.

Since February 1986, 60 to 100 Spanish-
speaking parents have gathered monthly to
talk about children's literature. They read
books published in Spanish, plus stories and
poems written by their children. Through
this unusual project, parents—many with
little schooling—learn to encourage their
children to write. And the parents have
begun to write themselves.

Project founder Dr. Alma Flor Ada, a
children's author and director of the Univer-
sity of San Francisco's EdD Multicultural
Program, says the program was designed
with two key understandings: the impor-
tance of parent involvement in children's
education and the need to help parents re-
cover their sense of dignity and identity.

The Pajaro Valley School District serves
a mostly rural population of 14,497 students
in the area surrounding Watsonville. Half
are Hispanic; 26.9% are migrant children.
One-third of all students do not yet speak
English fluently. In the district, the drop-out
rate for Hispanics is 53.6%.

These children provided the original in-
spiration. Ada was brought into district
classrooms as a role model of a Hispanic
who had distinguished herself in a creative
endeavor. As part of a "Meet the Author"
program which until then had featured only
English-speaking authors, Ada told her sto-
ries, explained how a book is made, what
motivates an author to write, and her own
feelings about her mother tongue and her
decision to speak and write in Spanish.

The children's enthusiasm was
enormous. They had already read Ada's
books and had written stories themselves.
She assured them that everybody can write.
When a third-grade boy asked, "Well, what

advice would you give to future writers?"
Ada and others knew that a spark had been
lit that they wanted to keep alive.

If the strategy worked for children, per-
haps it could work for adults, too, thought
former Bilingual Program director Alfonso
Anaya. He envisioned a parents' project that
would strengthen interaction between par-
ents and children, home and school, and
help improve reading and writing skills.

Ada and school officials planned care-
fully. To put parents at ease, they chose to
meet in a pleasant, roomy, well-lit library
rather than a schoolroom. The parents often
associated schools with fear and failure
because of their own lack of academic suc-
cess, or because they usually visit a school
only when their children are in trouble. The
library was a "special" place that sur-
rounded the parents with books, thus rein-
forcing the message Ada wanted to convey.

Children's literature would be the lure,
rather than an academic subject. Said Ada:
"Children's books would seem less threat-
ening."

The tone of the meetings had to be spe-
cial, too. Children were sent home from
school with invitations in Spanish asking
parents to meet a writer of children's books.
To encourage attendance, teachers' aides
offered rides to parents who lacked trans-
portation and provided children of all ages
with a parallel program nearby, with films
and storytelling.

AT THE FIRST meeting, Ada told
nearly a hundred parents that
their children—each and ev-
ery one of them—represent
the future of the world. Parents are the first
and best teachers, she said. They can influ-
ence academic progress by helping their
young ones develop skills at home, such as
language acquisition and reasoning.

Children need to develop these skills in
their home language, Ada said, since this is
the language in which the parents can best

offer help. "There is nothing negative or pejorative about the use of Spanish," she emphasized. "Spanish is, in and of itself, a language of great international importance. The use of the mother tongue and the transmission of that language to one's children is an inalienable right."

A well-developed home language is actually the best basis for the acquisition of a second language, she said. Rejection of language and identity can cause psychological harm.

Parents were deeply moved. Said one mother: "No one has ever told us that our children are worth something, and no one has ever told us that we are worth something."

For that first meeting, Ada selected five outstanding children's books. She read them aloud to the parents as they would be read to children—by dramatizing the actions and showing the illustrations. She wanted to show parents that there are beautiful, well-produced Spanish-language books of which they can be proud. A brief discussion of the books followed. Then each parent selected one book to take home.

From the second session on, the parents have been meeting first in small, teacher-guided groups according to which book they selected the previous month. There, they talk about their experiences over the last month. Then, all together, they read and listen to some of their children's stories. Finally, new books are presented and new small discussion groups are formed. A critical analysis of the events in the stories precedes application to real-life situations.

Often, these discussions are dramatic. During the ninth meeting, "Arturo and Clementina" by Adela Turin and Nella Bosna was presented.

In this extraordinarily illustrated book, two turtles, Arturo and Clementina, meet on a beautiful spring day and fall in love. Clementina talks to Arturo about her ambitions and her dreams of traveling around the world. Arturo listens, assenting vaguely. But instead, he assumes the responsibility of catching enough fish for the two of them, and Clementina is reduced to waiting by the pond for his return. When she begins to feel bored, she decides that she would like to paint or learn to play the flute, but her proposals are emphatically rejected by Arturo, who doesn't believe Clementina has

the talent to paint or play. However, he does bring her a record player, then a painting done by an artist friend of his. More gifts follow and Arturo ties them all onto Clementina's shell.

It becomes necessary to add more and more floors onto the house. Clementina spends all of her time cleaning and polishing her possessions, and since her home is so heavy, she can no longer move it.

Then, one day, on another spring morning, Clementina quietly decides to leave her house and go for a short walk.

Of course, she returns right away, before Arturo is due home from work. She keeps taking more walks, however, and since Arturo cannot understand the reason for Clementina's new found smiles, he does not hesitate to pronounce her a fool—until the day he returns to find an empty house.

He does not understand Clementina's ingratitude. "She had everything. A 25-story house, and every floor filled with treasures!" As for Clementina? She is probably still traveling, painting and playing her flute in a remote corner of the world.

Ada hesitated to use this book or any of the books in the series "In favor of girls"—not because she doubted the importance of non-sexist themes, but because she feared that a feminist emphasis might antagonize parents, especially the large number of men.

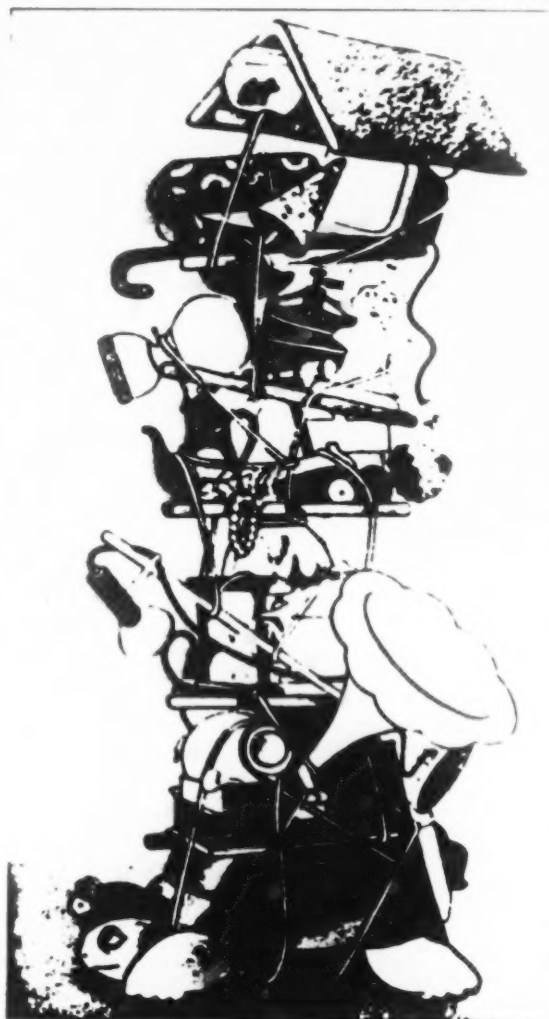
But rather than alienating parents, "Arturo and Clementina" generated discussion of insensitivity, dependence, and lack of communication in various circum-

stances beyond the dynamic between the sexes.

The discussion was full of surprises. Many reported they commonly felt unappreciated, frustrated and fearful when others did not believe in their potential.

One mother commented that she often feels like Clementina. Although her husband was a very good man, he did not believe in her ability to study and to learn English. "Nonetheless," she said, "I am not remaining silent like Clementina did, but instead I make him see that I can do things."

One man saw his own attitude reflected



Earthbound Clementina touched parents with her yearning for accomplishment.

in Arturo. The father habitually left all responsibility for the children to his wife. "Maybe what was happening to Clementina was that she was carrying too much weight," he said. "This makes me think that maybe my wife needs more of my help, and most of all that I listen to what her problems are."

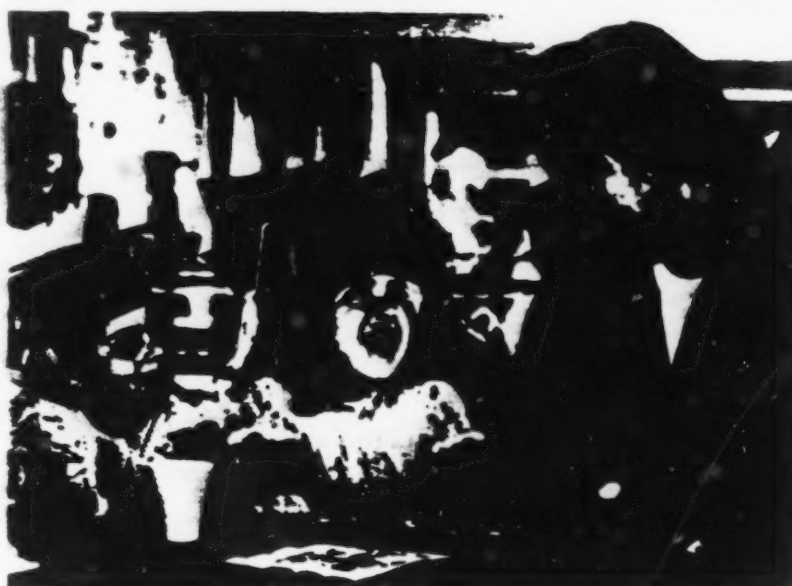
Besides such revelations, the project also tried to stimulate parents' interaction with children. With each book, parents received lists of questions to inspire home discussions, suggested activities related to the book, plus a blank book in which their children might be encouraged to write their own stories. "It was essential that parents spend time every evening with their children and with a book, and that at all times they encourage the children to reason and to express themselves clearly," Ada said.

HOME experiences have been positive. Parents have begun to read aloud to their children, and youngsters have brought home books from the school library. At the first meeting, none of the parents had public library cards. Nine months later, almost everyone reported several visits to the library to check out books, often with their children. One father placed a blackboard in the garage so that he could write a question for his children to answer, in writing, when they came home from school. A family discussion would follow.

When teachers' aides took videotapes of the meetings into the community, parents had a chance to re-analyze the discussions. Children felt double pride in seeing their confident, self-assured parents as characters on the TV screen, and in hearing their own stories being read aloud.

Parent empowerment, as an explicit goal of the project, increased, too. Parents have gradually replaced teachers as facilitators in the small-group discussions, and many petitioned the district school board for a meeting to talk about the academic future of their children. Other parents gave presentations on the use of children's literature at the Regional Migrant Education Conference.

Many parents—some for the first time—bought books for their children. Of even greater importance: the parents suggested that their children's stories were so good that they should be compiled. A book is in



Affection grew as parents learned to enhance their children's self-images.

progress, with illustrations done by the children. "We've discovered that our son has a talent for drawing," said one father proudly. "Maybe someday he will be an artist."

The meetings also gave parents a chance to know and trust one another better in an impersonal, fearful society, one father said. "Maybe after seeing each other at these meetings, we might be able to help one another more." Another father added, "In these meetings, we can learn to talk without being embarrassed or shy; it is very important to get rid of our inhibitions, because it is very difficult to talk in public."

Parents also report that their children are increasingly enthusiastic about reading, including reading in Spanish. One mother noted her son has blossomed. "Before beginning this program I was not aware that he was so special," she said during a meeting. "But seeing how much you have praised what he's written, I have begun to take much more notice of him, and now he has been chosen for a program for gifted children." And then she added, with a big smile, "And I have blossomed too, because I have brought here tonight a story which I have written." Her story was an excellent version of a fairy tale she had heard as a youngster.

"I discovered my children can write," one man said. "But also I have discovered something personal. I have discovered that by reading books one can find out many things." Upon bringing his children to the library, he discovered books about his own

culture. "Now I am finding out things I never knew about our roots and about what has happened to them and I have discovered that I can read in Spanish about the history of this country and of other countries."

Concluded one mother: "Ever since I know I have no need to feel ashamed of speaking Spanish I have become strong. Now I feel I can speak with the teachers about my children's education and I can tell them I want my children to know Spanish. I have gained courage."

—from the writings of Alma Flor Ada

Dr. Alma Flor Ada and daughter Rosalma Zubizarreta, a bilingual teacher in San Francisco, recently wrote "Language Arts Through Children's Literature," a guide on bringing multicultural, bilingual books into the classroom. The guidebook is available in English or Spanish through Children's Book Press, (415) 655-3395.

Last fall, Watsonville's Region 11 Migrant Program assumed sponsorship of the children's literature project, now funded by the state Department of Migrant Education. Children's literature projects also exist in Hayward, San Francisco, and Santa Barbara. For more information about starting a project, call Dr. Ada at (415) 341-2562 or Watsonville Migrant Education Director Paul Nava at (408) 728-6213.

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